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Bhakti Rhetoric in the Hagiography of 'Untouchable' Saints: Discerning *Bhakti*'s Ambivalence on Caste and Brahminhood

Patton Burchett

Bhakti has often been praised as a form of religion based on loving devotion that transcends social class, caste, and gender. Since at least the early twentieth century, the history of *bhakti* has generally been told in terms of "the *bhakti* movement," a single coherent "wave" of devotional sentiment and egalitarian social reform that spread across the entire Indian subcontinent. According to the commonly accepted narrative, this "movement" began in the Tamil South between the sixth and ninth centuries CE with the Śaiva Nāyaṇārs and Vaiṣṇava Āḻvārs. These poet-saints, according to one scholarly rendition of the trope, "produced a transformatory avalanche in terms of devotion *and social reform* that is now known as the Bhakti Movement" (Nandakumar 2003: 794; emphasis added). The concept of a single, coherent and socially progressive "*bhakti* movement" grew in large part out of the context of early twentieth century Indian nationalist agendas which sought to create a sense of national identity by propagating the notion of a shared pan-Indian *bhakti* religious heritage. Early and mid-twentieth century North Indian nationalist scholars such as Ramcandra Sukla and Hazariprasad Dvivedi sought to construct a nationalist history of India through the medium of *bhakti* and thus spoke of a pan-Indian *bhakti* "movement," or *āndolan* (in Hindi), sweeping across and uniting the subcontinent in shared values of love, progress, and social egalitarianism that reached deep into the past.[1] In his series of 1966 radio addresses to the Indian public, V. Raghavan gave a classic example of this rhetoric, referring to *bhakti* as the "democratic doctrine which consolidates all people without distinction of caste, community, nationality, or sex" (1966: 32). This conception of *bhakti* as being socially progressive continues still today. In 2003, Gail Omvedt wrote about the "radical bhakti (devotional) movement that had swept over northern and western India, bringing together women and men of low caste to proclaim equality and reject Brahmanic ritualism and caste hierarchy" (2003: 277). Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, in an essay published in 2005, described *bhakti* as a "deeply spiritual and democratizing movement" which is characteristically "revolutionary in spirit" and centered on "a questioning of the orthodox and repressive Brahminical understanding of Hinduism, [which] as such made it possible for the lower castes and women to give a form to their religious

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aspirations, emphasizing devotion and love, not knowledge, as a means of salvation" (123–24).

While the notion of *bhakti* as an egalitarian, democratizing and revolutionary force uniting an Indian nation is a rather recent one, the idea that devotion is the true path to salvation is far more time-tested. That the devotee's love for God, just like God's love for the devotee, transcends distinctions of birth and social class is a message as old as *bhakti* itself. It would seem that from the beginning, *bhakti* has by-and-large been spiritually egalitarian in theory; however, modern-day scholars have not hesitated to point out that *bhakti* theory has rarely if ever been translated into actual social reform or sustained egalitarian *bhakti* practice.[2] As Karen Pechilis writes, "Indeed, the failure of not only low-caste but also especially untouchable peoples to 'effect any change of place' through *bhakti* has been noted in contemporary scholarship" (1999: 29). David N. Lorenzen adds that, "The only significant rejection of caste among Hindu sects is found in Virasaivism, in *nirguni* sects such as the Kabir and Ravidas Panths, and to a lesser extent in the Arya Samaj. Even in these cases, the opposition is limited mainly to the realm of ideology rather than practice" (2004: 10). Reasons given for the inability of *bhakti* to effect social change include, among others, (*a*) its failure to address fundamental economic structures (that is, the intimate ties between caste and systems of production)[3] and (*b*) the fact that its egalitarian message may have originated and endured primarily as a political rhetoric motivated and propagated more by power concerns and economic interests than by any broad grassroots support for social change.[4] These arguments, which focus on the political and economic aspects of *bhakti*'s socio-historical context, are both valid and important; but in this paper, I aim to explore the gap between *bhakti* theory and *bhakti* practice in a different fashion. In what follows, I will examine a literary genre vital in the formation of the *bhakti* tradition: the hagiographies of the *bhakti* saints. As we will see, the hagiographies of the four major 'untouchable' poet-saints—those *bhaktas* at the very lowest rung of the Hindu social order who would have benefited most from *bhakti*-inspired social change—offer us an especially productive point of access to the question of why egalitarian *bhakti* ideology has consistently not translated into egalitarian *bhakti* practice or social reform.

John S. Hawley has noted that "[*bhakti*'s] ecumenical spirit is almost never extended from the realm of *bhakti* hagiography into the real world" (1988: 16). In this essay, I argue that the problem goes beyond a simple and widely accepted lack of connection between theory and practice, or spirit and real world, when it comes to the *bhakti* ideology expressed in hagiographical literature. As I will demonstrate, it is not simply that there has been a failure to put the egalitarian *bhakti* theory of these 'untouchable' hagiographies into actual practice, but rather that the messages in these hagiographies are themselves far less democratizing and socially progressive than they might at first appear.[5] While the remembered life-stories of these four 'untouchable' saints seem on the surface to speak to the caste-transcending nature of *bhakti*, a closer reading shows that, in subtle ways, these stories also reinforce the social hierarchy and confirm Brahmins as possessing a social identity of higher

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purity and value than any other. In other words, what appears to be egalitarian *bhakti* theory is itself, on one level, subtly working *against* the actual practice of egalitarian social relations and *for* the maintenance of the purity-based caste hierarchy. A brief overview of the place of 'untouchable' *bhakti* saints in contemporary Dalit ('untouchable') movements will illustrate my point further, for it seems that modern-day Dalits have become attuned to the ambiguous and less-than-progressive nature of the *bhakti* message and have largely abandoned the 'untouchable' *bhakti* poets who would seem to represent a clear source of pride and inspiration for them.[6]

While, for convenience, I use the terms "*bhakti* theory," "*bhakti* ideology" and "*bhakti* message" throughout this essay, in the pages that follow we will see that the very notion of any such singular, coherent *bhakti* "theory," "ideology" or "message" is a problematic one, for the popular conception that there is an egalitarian ethos inherent in *bhakti*, while certainly not without some basis, is simply not accurate. In presuming (and exalting) the presence of a democratizing and revolutionary spirit in *bhakti* across history, many scholars have unintentionally presented a notion of *bhakti* that is far more coherent, consistent, and anachronistically modern than what a close reading of *bhakti* texts actually demonstrates. This essay, then, in offering a close examination and analysis of the hagiographies of the four main 'untouchable' *bhakti* saints, is meant to disrupt overly simplistic and naïve conceptions of *bhakti* and to contribute to and strengthen an existing strand of scholarship (much of which I draw on in the pages below) that has pointed out clear instances of *bhakti*'s ambivalence on caste, Brahminhood, and social reform. An implicit component of my argument is thus—to borrow the language of Shantanu Phukan (1996: 43)—that we should *not* approach the theory/ideology of *bhakti* as some unitary presence inherent in *bhakti* songs, poetry, and hagiographical stories, but rather as a *range* constructed variously by different readers and listeners in their encounters with *bhakti* art forms. While the egalitarian, democratic and revolutionary may occupy important spaces on this range, *bhakti*'s message in regard to the social sphere has throughout history often been far more complex—muddled even—and far less progressive than these words convey.[7]

In what follows, it will become undeniably clear that the 'untouchable' *bhakti* hagiographies exalt the caste-transcending nature of both God's love for the devotee and the devotee's love for God. Yet while these stories admit salvation to all, they also largely affirm the caste and purity restrictions of ordinary life in the world. I argue here that these mixed messages result in large part from an apparent cultural ambivalence regarding the identity of the Brahmin male. On the one hand he represents a spiritual ideal; while on the other, he is a hereditary member of a privileged social class.

Let us now turn to the stories of our 'untouchable' *bhakti* saints. Hawley writes that, "The bhakti tradition by nature runs in families—this is a piety of shared experience, of singing and enthusiastic communication—and each clan, to be inclusive, needs to have at least one representative from the Untouchable castes" (1988: 13). While this statement may imply that *bhakti* movements are formed with far more

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of an organized agenda than they actually are, the fact is that there are only four major 'untouchable' saints, each seemingly representing a distinct community. In South India this 'untouchable' representative was Tirruppāṇ Āḷvār for the Vaiṣṇavas and Nandaṇār for the Śaivas; in Maharashtra it was Chokhāmeḷā; and in North India it was Raidās. An examination of key events in the hagiography of these four 'untouchable' poet-saints follows.

Tiruppāṇ Āḷvār

Tiruppāṇ Āḷvār lived in the Tamil South in the eight or ninth century CE and seems to be the first 'untouchable' devotee to have been given the status of a *bhakti* saint. He is one of twelve Vaiṣṇava Āḷvārs, a title which refers to those "who are deeply immersed in the love of Vishnu."[8] Only a single poem is attributed to Tiruppāṇ, but it is one of the most treasured in the entire Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition and is still today recited as part of the daily liturgy of all Śrīvaiṣṇava temples. His biography appears in each of the five collections of the lives of the Āḷvārs written between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The earliest and simplest version is the *Divyasūricaritam* (The Life) of Garuḍavāhana-Paṇḍita, written in Sanskrit around the twelfth century CE. Next chronologically are two collections written in Tamil and both entitled the *Guruparamparāprabhāvam* (The Splendor of the Succession of Gurus), one from each of the two subsects of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community: the Vatakaḷai, whose version dates from the late fourteenth to early fifteenth century, and the Teṇkaḷai, whose version's date is disputed but is likely from the thirteenth century. Another key source is a Tamil collection of all the Āḷvārs' lives called the *Alvarkal Vaibhāvam* (The Glory), written by Vativalakiya Nampi Tacar in the fifteenth or sixteenth century.

In the basic story, Tiruppāṇ grows up as part of an 'untouchable' *pāṇar* caste of bards and minstrels[9] in a town near the temple of Śrīraṇgam, arguably the most revered of all Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage sites and indisputably the single most important temple for Śrīvaiṣṇava devotees. From the moment he is able to speak, Tiruppāṇ sings beautiful songs praising the qualities of Raṅgī (or Raṅganātha), the form of Viṣṇu worshipped in the temple of Śrīraṇgam just across the river from his hometown. Every day he travels to the south bank of the river and sings from a distance to his beloved Raṅgī. Tiruppāṇ yearns to see the image of his beloved, but is unable to enter the temple due to his 'untouchable' status. Eventually, the beauty of his songs and the intensity of his devotion awake the compassion of Raṅgī, who comes in a dream to the Brahmin priest of Śrīraṇgam and tells him to bring Tiruppāṇ into the temple on his shoulders.[10] The priest goes to get Tiruppāṇ, but he refuses to come, saying, "How could you do such a thing with me, your slave, who belongs to the class of untouchables?"[11] In another version, he states, "How can I step with my feet on to the holy temple of Raṅga?" And the Brahmin replies, "Never mind! You can go [sitting] on my shoulders."[12] In yet another version, Tiruppāṇ is so insistent that he cannot come to the temple because of his low birth and sinful life that the priest must physically force him onto his shoulders.[13] Eventually, Tiruppāṇ enters

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the temple riding on the shoulders of the Brahmin priest, and, gazing at Raṅgī in devotional ecstasy, he sings ten verses of praise describing the God from foot to head. These are the very verses that are remembered and recited still today in the Śrīvaiṣṇava community. The story concludes with Tiruppāṇ miraculously uniting with and disappearing into the image of his beloved Raṅgī.

In this story, Tiruppāṇ's devotion is rewarded with the sight of the Lord, yet he is only allowed to enter the temple on the shoulders of a Brahmin. By riding piggy-back on the Brahmin priest, he does not actually set foot on temple ground and can thereby avoid polluting the sacred temple space. On one level, the story is genuinely triumphant: the 'untouchable' not only enters the temple, but is carried in by a Brahmin, who evidently pollutes himself by doing so. Furthermore, despite his presumed caste impurity, through the power of his devotion Tiruppāṇ achieves the highest spiritual goal by merging with the divine. Yet the message is mixed. Clearly, Tiruppāṇ is not allowed to touch the temple ground as he will pollute it. In even the very earliest version, it is Raṅgī, Viṣṇu himself, who commands (in a dream) that the temple priest bring Tiruppāṇ in on his shoulders, a divine affirmation that as an 'untouchable,' at least in the human world, he truly is polluting. While in this earliest account of his life, Tiruppāṇ is born from his 'untouchable' mother, in the later versions he is born miraculously outside a human womb and becomes a *caṇḍāla* ('untouchable') simply because he is found and raised by a *caṇḍāla* family.[14] In this way, 'Brahminizing' authors removed the problem of Tiruppāṇ's 'untouchability' and sought to demonstrate that he was a truly exceptional and miraculous figure, not an ordinary human being whose life could be emulated.

Nandaṇār

Nandaṇār is one of sixty-three Śaiva saints known as Nāyaṇārs. He was born into an 'untouchable' community called the *pulai* and, like Tiruppāṇ, lived in the Tamil South in the eighth or ninth century CE. In contrast to both Raidās and Tiruppāṇ, Nandaṇār left behind no poetry and is remembered only for the remarkable story of his life as an 'untouchable' devotee. The oldest and most famous version of his story, along with those of all the other Nāyaṇārs, is told in Cekkilar's twelfth century *Tamil Tirumurai* or *Periya Puranam* (Great Story). Here I rely on Vidya Dehejia's brief account of the basic narrative:

> This untouchable came from a community that provided leather for drums and animal gut for the stringed musical instruments used in the temples. Nandanar was an ardent devotee of Siva who stood every day outside the temple walls (not being allowed closer access), singing the praises of his Lord. His greatest desire in life was to go to Chidambaram and see the dancing Siva within the shrine. Each day he vowed that he would go the next day, and hence acquired the name of Tirunalai-povar, or "He who will go tomorrow." Ultimately, he made his way to the Chidambaram temple, where he stood outside its high walls, dancing in ecstasy

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> that he should have reached the holy city and weeping in despair that he could not enter the temple. Siva appeared to his temple priests and commanded them to light a fire and lead the untouchable through it and into his presence in the sanctum. Nandanar walked unharmed through the flames, entered the sanctum, walked deliriously up to the image of the dancing Siva, and disappeared under the raised foot of his Lord (1988: 173–74).

What is not mentioned in this account is for our purposes the most interesting point in the story: Why Nandaṇār had to walk through a fire in order to enter the temple sanctuary. The translation of the episode in Cekkilar's text goes like this:

> In his sleep he thought: "This base birth is certainly a hindrance." But the Lord of the Dance in the sacred hall knew of his state, and appeared before him in a dream, smiling gracefully, in order to resolve all his troubles. The Lord of the sacred hall gracefully told him: "When you bathe in the fire it will extinguish this birth and you will be as a Brahmin wearing the triple thread on his chest."[15]

Śiva commanded the temple Brahmins to prepare the fire and

> Nandanar with his hands pressed above his head, thinking of the feet of God, rounded the fire, then entered it. Immediately his false image disappeared. Then in the image of a muni [sage] who does good deeds, with sacred thread, with the braided tuft of a munivar he came out of the fire.[16]

Again, on one level this story exalts the caste-transcending power of *bhakti*. Śiva personally responds to the pure and intense devotion of Nandaṇār and arranges for this 'untouchable' to transgress social convention by entering his sacred temple. Despite being 'untouchable,' Nandaṇār's love for Śiva is so powerful that he achieves union with the god, merging into the feet of the image of his dancing Lord. Unfortunately, things are not as simple as this. Nandaṇār is not able to enter the temple until he has shed his lowly birth by passing through the fire, something that Śiva himself commands. Thus, again we see God himself confirming the impurity of the 'untouchable.' What's more, Nandaṇār does not enter the fire simply to purify himself, but to become a Brahmin. In fact, one could argue, as Lynn Vincentnathan does, that in this story, "Nandanar is not really an Untouchable; the Untouchable form is his false image" which is destroyed in the fire to reveal his true Brahmin form (2005: 110). Either way, the story makes it clear that true spiritual purity is represented by the ideal of the Brahmin with his sacred thread.

Raidās

The most popular of 'untouchable' saints, Raidās (also known as Ravidās), lived in Benares in the fifteenth or sixteenth century (*ca.* 1450–1520 CE)[17] and was part of

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the 'untouchable' *camār* community of leatherworkers whose traditional occupation primarily involved removing animal (especially cow) carcasses and tanning their hides. The most detailed sources for the life of Raidās are Anantadās's *Raidās Parcaī* (*ca.* 1588), Priyādās's *Bhaktirasabodhinī* (1712),[18] and a Punjabi text, the *Pothīpremabodh* (*ca.* 1693). Anantadās and Priyādās stress Raidās's victories in his multiple confrontations with orthodox Brahmins who questioned his authority. Both authors explain that Raidās was a Brahmin in his previous life who was reborn as a *camār* because of errors in conduct. Specifically, Priyādās explains that in Raidās's prior birth, he was a pupil of Rāmānand.[19] When he compromised his *guru*'s purity by offering him food from a merchant who had earlier been tainted by contact with *camār*s, Raidās was cursed to die and be reborn a *camār* himself. In this version, baby Raidās refuses to take milk from his *camār* mother and only feeds when Rāmānand, having heard of the baby's distress, comes to adopt him.

Anantadās and Priyādās both mention that a Queen Jhālī from Chittorgarh came to Benares to seek initiation from Raidās and later invited him to a feast at her home, thereby enraging the Brahmins in her royal court.[20] One of the best-known episodes in Raidās's hagiography comes from their accounts of this visit to Queen Jhālī's court. The court Brahmins refuse to eat at the same table as the 'untouchable' Raidās, so he seats himself in deep meditation in a camp outside the palace and mentally projects the image of his body between each and every Brahmin as they begin to eat. Embarrassed, overwhelmed, and fearful of the retribution of such a clearly powerful saint, the Brahmins run off to find Raidās and to touch his feet. They arrive at his camp, begging forgiveness, and ask Raidās for his council. At this point, Anantadās's text states:

> Raidas spoke, telling the story of his previous birth. "I was a Brahmin but did not know god (i.e. Hari). Thus I took birth as a Shudra." [Ripping open his chest] he revealed his sacred thread of gold within; all present grew faint at the sight. Raidas continued, "Practicing bhakti I was saved. Without god's love the world is base. Caste and kinship confer no authority. Only he who practices devotion crosses over."[21]

Here the classic *bhakti* message is stated outright: caste does not matter in spiritual concerns; it is devotion that brings salvation. Yet, significantly, the enduring image is that of Raidās ripping open his chest to reveal a sacred golden thread, "one of the most tangible physical symbols signifying the Brahmin's privileged position at the apex of the social hierarchy" (Schaller 2005: 226). This episode forcibly demonstrates that to be spiritually pure is to be a Brahmin and to be the wearer of a sacred thread.[22] At the same time, it is clear that the Brahmins in this story are shamed by Raidās and shown the error of refusing to eat with or acknowledge the spiritual authority of the 'untouchable' Raidās. They touch his feet and beg for his council, admitting their ignorance and hypocrisy. The question is, however, are the Brahmins guilty of refusing to eat with an 'untouchable'—of following conventional purity

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restrictions—or are they guilty of not recognizing that Raidās is in actuality a Brahmin?

The exposure of Brahmin ignorance and pettiness is not an isolated incident in Raidās's hagiography. On multiple occasions in his story he encounters Brahmins and illustrates their arrogance, insincerity, and mistaken attachment to knowledge, social distinctions, and ritual forms over what really counts: loving devotion and purity of heart. In fact, stories mocking and criticizing Brahmins appear again and again throughout all the *bhakti* hagiographical literature, much of which was written *by Brahmins*. In his *Patterns in Indian Hagiography*, W. L. Smith (2003) devotes an entire chapter to retelling various hagiographical stories mocking and criticizing the Brahmin. Clearly some Brahmins were willing to openly acknowledge and critique their own faults and to admit a real gap between the spiritual ideal of the Brahmin and their own behavior as members of the Brahmin social class. However, acknowledging that the social hierarchy and its purity restrictions were themselves faulty was an entirely different matter for these hagiographers. For, in all the stories we have discussed, on some significant level caste purity distinctions, and the social hierarchy based on them, are entirely upheld. Here, even in theory, *bhakti* is not at all egalitarian, democratizing, or socially revolutionary. Whether revealing a sacred Brahmin thread within their body, passing through a fire to shed caste impurity and emerge as a Brahmin or entering the sacred temple only on the shoulders of a Brahmin, the message of these hagiographical accounts seems not to be that the 'untouchable' is equally as pure as the Brahmin but rather that the 'untouchable' can overcome his impurity and become *like a Brahmin* through the power of his devotion. Loving devotion is now the ultimate good, but the socio-spiritual hierarchy of purity remains in place.

Cokhāmeḷā

Cokhāmeḷā was born in the second half of the thirteenth century in Maharashtra. He was a Mahār, "a caste which performed village service duties ranging from carting away dead animals and bringing fuel to the funeral pyre to adjudicating boundaries and caring for the horses of traveling government officials" (Zelliot 1995: 212), and represents the only major *bhakti* figure in Maharashtra from an 'untouchable' caste.[23] Cokhāmeḷā (also known as "Cokhā") is a revered figure in the Vārkarī *sampradāya* ("the tradition of the pilgrims"), a tradition of the Marathi-speaking area of India dedicated to the worship of Kṛṣṇa in the form of Viṭṭhal (or Viṭhobhā) and centered on pilgrimage to his temple in Pandharpur (Zelliot 1981: 136). Beyond his poetry itself, the primary source for the life of Cokhāmeḷā is the Marathi hagiographical literature produced by Mahīpati (1715–90), a householder and village accountant who renounced his administrative position to devote himself to collecting and recording the lives of notable *bhakta*s. The following stories from Cokhāmeḷā's life come from Mahīpati's first and most-widely circulated work, the massive collective hagiography entitled the *Bhaktavijay* (Victory of the Bhaktas).[24]

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Cokhāmeḷa lived in Pandharpur, home of the temple of Viṭhobhā located on the banks of the Bhima River. He would bathe in the Bhima, circumambulate the entire city and then prostrate himself in devotion at the main door of the temple, since the temple priests would not allow 'untouchables' to enter. Due to his steadfast devotion, Viṭhobhā one night comes to Cokhā, takes him by the hand, and lovingly leads him into the innermost shrine. When the Brahmin priests learn of his entry into the temple they order him to leave Pandharpur so as no longer to defile Viṭhobhā. Cokhā responds that God cannot be defiled—though (and this is a vital point) he implicitly assumes his own impurity and defilement—and that, "To God supreme, the Lord of Rukmini, all castes are alike"; but this only enrages the Brahmins further. They state: "We are expert in every Shastra, but you are of low caste, and though an outcaste you are attempting to give us knowledge. So now go to the other side of the Bhima river and live there. If on the morrow you are seen here, we shall give you a good punishment."

Cokhā moves to the other side of the river, where he continues to worship Viṭhobhā with all his heart. One day, while he is eating his lunch, Viṭhobhā suddenly appears and sits down to eat beside him. While serving curds, Cokhā's wife accidentally spills food on Viṭhobhā's yellow robe. As Cokhā is scolding his wife a Brahmin priest walks by and hears his conversation. Angrily, he says, "Seeing me here, he [Cokhā] is talking at random. For how can the Lord of the World have dined with one who is an outcaste?" The Brahmin approaches Cokhā, slaps him hard on the mouth, and immediately departs. When the priest returns to the temple he is astonished to find the image of Viṭhobhā soiled with curds and the cheek of the God severely swollen. Full of fear and sorrow at persecuting God's beloved *bhakta*, the priest takes Cokhā from the banks of the Bhima and leads him by the hand into the temple. When Cokhā embraces Viṭhobhā, the swelling on the image's face immediately subsides. The story concludes by stating that from that time forward, Cokhā always entered the temple freely.

In several ways, Cokhāmeḷā's story contrasts with that of Tirrupāṇ, Nandaṇār, and Raidās. He is not carried into the temple by a Brahmin (like Tirrupāṇ), nor does he become a Brahmin before entering the temple (like Nandaṇār); rather, he walks into the temple on his own two feet as an 'untouchable.' Furthermore, unlike Raidās, he is not made out to be a Brahmin in a previous birth, though his birth is described as miraculous (outside of a human womb). Disguised as a Brahmin, Viṭhobhā begs a mango from Cokhā's mother. He takes a bite of the fruit, deems it sour, and hands it back to her. Later, when she takes it out from the folds of her sari, she discovers that the mango has miraculously transformed into a beautiful baby, none other than Cokhā. Zelliot remarks that aside from this miraculous birth story, "There is no attempt to relate [Cokhā's] existence to any other realm than that of the Untouchables. In other words, he has not been Brahminized, although the birth legends contain possibilities" (2005: 22).

Nevertheless, Cokhā's life story also offers important parallels with that of the other three major 'untouchable' saints. Brahmin arrogance, prejudice, and ignorance

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are once again displayed and criticized. More importantly, mixed messages about caste persist even in Cokhā's apparently un-Brahminized legend. Cokhā maintains that it is impossible for God to be polluted by anyone and asserts that, in the eyes of the Lord, all castes are the same; yet at the same time, the clear message in both his own poetry and in the hagiography about him is that Cokhā acknowledges, accepts, and actually feels he deserves his 'untouchable' status in the ordinary social sphere. As Jayashree B. Gokhale-Turner explains, the difficulty of his life as an 'untouchable' caused Cokhā to pose two questions: "First, why was he ever born, and second, how may he attain the Divine if the very shadow of his presence is defiling?" (1981: 31). Cokhā acknowledges that his low birth is the result of previous crimes committed against Kṛṣṇa, yet he asserts that it is still possible to reach God through faith and grace. Thus he prescribes acquiescence to the *varṇa* order and fulfillment of the duties prescribed by the caste system in combination with *bhakti* to erase the stain of 'untouchability' (Gokhale-Turner 1981: 31). As we will now see, this perspective has been quite problematic for contemporary Indian social movements seeking the abolition of caste. As Zelliot remarks, "Chokhamela had accepted the concept of sins in past lives which resulted in low birth, and not only Mahars but also other Untouchables seem to reject this rationale. Chokhamela had found joy in equality with other *bhaktas* and in God's sight; the new generation wanted it in social and political matters" (1981: 143).

'Untouchable" *Bhakta*s and the Dalit Movement

In an important article about *bhakti* and contemporary Dalit movements, Gokhale-Turner makes the striking statement that, "For the *bhakti* tradition no social solution to Untouchability is possible; indeed, the very question is irrelevant. As Untouchability has suprahuman origins and justifications, it is pointless to call for social action to remedy it" (1981: 32). While one might question whether devotion to the Divine necessarily implies acceptance of the notion that one's place in the caste hierarchy is divinely ordained by karmic processes, the fact remains that this perspective towards *bhakti* seems to have been adopted by a great many Dalits today. As Gokhale-Turner states, "The teachings of Chokha Mela have been almost completely repudiated, and the *bhakti* tradition's understanding of caste and the solution to Untouchability is now seen as an ideological mystification perpetrated by the higher castes and succumbed to by the lower castes" (33).[25] She explains that writers of *dalit sahitya*[26] have made it clear that "Chokha Mela and his tradition exercise no particular appeal or attraction for them....His example of acceptance and self-abnegation, coupled with an unswerving faith in the religious system which made him Untouchable, is anathema to a generation raised on the teachings of the Ambedkar movement" (34).[27]

Modern-day Dalits have found hagiographical representations of Raidās equally problematic. In regard to the well-known story in which Raidās rips open his chest to reveal a sacred thread inside, Hawley writes that,

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> Certain recent interpreters of Ravidas from among the *camār* community have wished to disown the story altogether, especially the influential Lucknow writer Candrikāprasād Jijñāsu, who desired so intensely to separate Ravidas from the Brahmin and even the larger Hindu tradition that he made him out to be a Buddhist (2005: 156).

Jijnasu's book—written in 1956, the same year that Ambedkar converted to Buddhism—urges the reader to abandon Hinduism, stressing that Raidās was not a Brahmin, but a *camār*, and not a Hindu, but a Buddhist (Lochtefeld 2005: 156).

While Jijnasu provides a somewhat extreme example, many Dalits have struggled with exactly how to conceive of Raidās in relation to their own goals for social and political change. Raidās's message, in his poetry and hagiography, is clearly not about social transformation, but about the saving power of devotion and the unimportance of caste in one's relationship with God; and for this very reason he has not been as central a symbol in social movements for Dalit rights as one might expect. In a fascinating unpublished paper, Joel Lee (2006) takes up exactly this topic—"the dilemma in Dalit movements over whether or not to own Ravidas, or to what degree to own him, and the arguments given in support of such decisions." So far as we know, it was not until the twentieth century that Raidās was utilized in political contexts as a figurehead of Dalit movements. In the Punjab region, the Ādi Dharm ("Original Religion") movement of the 1920s and 30s projected Ravidās as its patron saint and symbol, while in Uttar Pradesh, Svāmī Achūtānand's Ādi Hindū ("Original Hindu") movement made the same decision at roughly the same time. Yet Lee makes it clear that it is Ambedkar and Buddhism that have been the most powerful and widespread symbols/instruments of contemporary Dalit rights movements.[28] Through textual research and interviews with Dalit activists, Lee identifies the following "problems" with Raidās as a Dalit icon: (*1*) he is a Hindu and his message is often seen as too compatible with Hindu thought (and thus with the caste system); (*2*) he is not considered revolutionary enough (especially in comparison to Kabīr and Ambedkar) and is seen as more religious than social in his concern; and (*3*) his potential is limited by the fact that he is known specifically as a *camār* and not as an 'untouchable' generally. As Lee points out, "Indeed, twentieth century history suggests that non-Chamar rallying under the banner of Ravidas is rare."

The case of Nandaṇār proves to be much the same as that of Cokhā and Raidās. As Lynn Vincentnathan writes, "Nandanar is not much of a hero for today's Untouchable youth, who have other more progressive heroes, such as Ambedkar" (2005: 115). In interviews with young 'untouchables' in Tamil Nadu, she found that Nandaṇār's obliging and obedient acceptance of his caste place and duties did not make him a role model for achieving a better life in this world.[29] Clearly, then, contemporary Dalits have by and large rejected, abandoned, or ignored the 'untouchable' *bhakti* saints in their struggle for social justice.[30]

While this brief overview of Dalit perspectives on the 'untouchable' *bhakti* saints has taken us slightly astray from the hagiographical literature, it has further illus-

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trated one of this essay's key assertions about that literature: namely, that the *bhakti* theology in the poetry and life stories of the 'untouchable' saints demonstrates an ambivalence about caste and Brahminhood that actually works against efforts at egalitarian social change. In the end, it seems that *bhakti*'s enduring success and popularity among the lower classes should not be linked to an ideology of revolutionary and democratizing social reform and progress, but rather to an ideology "which offers them a more positive status and self-image" in their own eyes and perhaps even in the eyes of others (Lorenzen 1987: 295). As Lorenzen has pointed out in his work on the Kabīr panth, participation in certain *bhakti* communities may indeed embody "an element of social protest against the hierarchical structure of the Hindu socio-religious order," but it simultaneously "represents a general acceptance of the hegemony of that order" (1987: 295). Similarly, A. K. Ramanujan, using the terminology of Victor Turner, has remarked that "bhakti-communities, while proclaiming anti-structure, necessarily develop their own structures for behaviour and belief, often minimal, frequently composed of elements selected from the very structures they deny or reject" (1973: 35).[31] Joseph O'Connell goes even further, suggesting that *bhakti* actually works to make discriminatory caste practices and structures more enduring. He argues that *bhakti*'s impact on society "tends not to involve major structural changes, but rather modest modifications" which may soften caste attitudes and make social norms slightly more flexible, but simultaneously makes those norms and attitudes that much more durable (O'Connell 1993: 12–13).

Untangling Social Brahminhood and Spiritual Brahminhood

Our foregoing analysis of *bhakti* hagiography leads me to concur with Ranajit Guha's historical assessment that, *in most cases*, "Bhakti could do little to abolish the social distance between the high-born and the low-born, although some of the former's spiritual qualities might, under certain conditions, be acquired by the latter, without, however, effecting any change of place" (1997: 54).[32] One could argue even further that not only does *bhakti* not effect any change of social location, it can actually work to highlight and justify social distance. For instance, Vincentnathan notes that hagiographical stories exalting the lives of 'untouchable' *bhakti* saints can actually "serve to emphasize the inherent inferiority of all other Untouchables" by implying that since they have not achieved the spiritual heights of the 'untouchable' saint, their low status must be a deserved result of their degraded nature and not a function of external factors (2005: 118).

Whether one agrees with Vincentnathan or not, what is clear in the hagiographical stories we have discussed—with the possible exception of Cokhāmeḷā—is the existence of mixed and conflicting messages regarding the identity of the Brahmin. The Sanskrit word *brāhmaṇa*, a member of the Brahmin social class, is a (*vṛddhi*) derivative of the word *brahman*, which refers to the Absolute, the ultimate spiritual entity. Thus a connection between the social class of Brahmins and elevated spiritual status

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is built into the very language. Among the authors of these hagiographies, and presumably among many others in Indian society as well, the identification of the *social class* of the Brahmin with the *spiritual ideal* of the Brahmin seems to have been so culturally entrenched that these 'untouchable' *bhakta*s had first to be considered Brahmins in some sense before their spiritual achievements could make any sense.

This ambiguity and confusion regarding the identity of the Brahmin has clear precedents in early Sanskrit literature as well as obvious parallels in other vernacular texts of the *bhakti* tradition. The *Manusmṛti* (Laws of Manu) states:

> The very birth of a Brāhmaṇa is an eternal incarnation of the sacred law; for he is born to [fulfill] the sacred law, and becomes one with Brahman. A Brāhmaṇa, coming into existence, is born as the highest on earth, the lord of all created beings, for the protection of the treasury of the law. Whatever exists in the world is the property of the Brāhmaṇa; on account of the excellence of his origin the Brāhmaṇa is, indeed, entitled to it all (1.98–100).[33]

Clearly, here birth is what makes one a Brahmin and what gives one both sacred spiritual status and corresponding social privileges. This perspective—that class is assumed at birth—dominates the Sanskrit literature, but undoubtedly there are important instances when this notion is challenged.

A particularly good example of an alternative vision of Brahmin identity comes in a story from the third book of the *Mahābhārata* (175–78), the *Āraṇyakaparva* (Book of the Forest).[34] Bhīma is wandering through the woods when he sees a huge snake, a starving boa which suddenly attacks and overpowers him, wrapping him in a single mighty coil. The snake—a former royal seer cursed to this condition for insulting Brahmins!—states that he will set Bhīma free if he replies correctly to a series of questions. Yudhiṣṭhira comes and finds his brother encircled by the snake's coils and agrees to respond to the snake's questions. The key conversation occurs in 3.177.15–30 when the snake asks who a Brahmin is and how he can be identified:

> *Yudhiṣṭhira says:* "He is known as a Brahmin, King of Snakes, in who truthfulness, liberality, patience, deportment, mildness, self-control, and compassion are found. And he may gain knowledge of the supreme Brahman, beyond happiness and unhappiness, Snake, on reaching which they grieve no more."
>
> *The Snake says:* "Authority, truth, and the Brahman extend to all four classes: even *śudras* may be truthful, liberal, tolerant, mild, nonviolent, and compassionate, Yudhiṣṭhira."
>
> *Yudhiṣṭhira responds:* "The marks of the *śudra* are not found in a Brahmin; but a *śudra* is not necessarily a *śudra*, nor a Brahmin a Brahmin. In whomever the Brahmin's marks are found, Snake, he is known as a Brahmin; and in whom they are not found, him they designate as a *śudra*."
>
> *The Snake says:* "If you judge a Brahmin by his conduct, king, then birth has no

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> meaning, my dear sir, as long as no conduct is evident."

Yudhiṣṭhira responds that birth is hard to ascertain and conduct is the chief postulate determining class. At the end of their conversation, the Snake states (3.178.42–45): "Truthfulness, self-control, austerity, discipline, noninjuriousness, and continual charity are people's means to greatness, and not birth or family, king. Your strong-armed brother Bhīma here is unhurt and free."

In this narrative, Brahminhood is unmistakably defined by one's conduct and personal qualities and not by birth. Yudhiṣṭhira implies that even one born with the social identity of a Brahmin can be designated a *śudra* if his ethical conduct does not meet Brahmin standards. Yet even in this 'enlightened' perspective, the word "Brahmin" is still used to refer to the highest spiritual and ethical status while "*śudra*" marks one of lesser moral conduct. Just as in the hagiographies we examined, the relationship between social and spiritual Brahminhood is questioned, but at the same time the term "Brahmin"—a term marking a hereditary social identity—maintains a monopoly on spiritual achievement. The confusion between social and spiritual categories is clearly evident in Yudhiṣṭhira's comment that "a *śudra* is not necessarily a *śudra*, nor a Brahmin a Brahmin." Such a convoluted and ambivalent perspective would certainly be hard put to inspire social change.

Another important example of ambiguity regarding the identity of the Brahmin comes from the *Rāmcaritmānas*. This text, a vernacular rendering of the *Rāmāyaṇa* by the sixteenth/seventeenth-century Brahmin poet-saint Tulsīdās, brings us back into the realm of *bhakti* literature. In fact, the *Rāmcaritmānas* is arguably the most important and influential piece of *bhakti* literature in all of North India. Linda Hess has noted that in this text,

> hierarchical and egalitarian prescriptions sometimes directly follow one another. A declaration that merit can be gained only by worshipping the feet of Brahmans may be followed by a ringing affirmation that Rām is blind to distinctions and cares for nothing but *bhakti* (1988: 246).

She points out a particularly striking instance of this in the third book of Tulsīdās's epic, where Rām states:

> I am never pleased with an enemy of Brahmans;
> but one who serves those gods on earth sincerely, in
> thought, word, and deed, gains power over me,
> Brahma, Shiva, and all the gods.
> Though a Brahman curse you, beat you, or abuse you,
> he should be worshipped. So sing the saints.
> Worship Brahmans, even those with no kindness or virtue.
> Don't worship Shudras, even those with every virtue, skill,
> and wisdom (3.33.8–34.2).[35]

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Immediately after this speech, Rām goes to the *āśram* of Śabarī, a savage hermit woman and a model devotee. She asks how she can possibly praise Rām since she is of such a vile caste. Rām replies:

> Listen, lady, to my words. I recognize
> only one relationship: devotion. Caste, kinship,
> lineage, piety, power, wealth, strength, connections,
> virtue, achievements—a man with all these but without
> devotion is like a cloud without water (3.35–36).

These verses illustrate, in characteristic fashion, *bhakti*'s ambivalent message regarding caste and Brahminhood. Immediately after praising the virtues of Brahmins ("those gods on earth") and remarking that even Brahmins exhibiting improper conduct should be worshipped, Rām states that in his eyes—the eyes of God—birth and caste are of no concern; only devotion matters. Just as in the 'untouchable' saints' hagiographies, when it comes to *bhakti*, egalitarianism applies in the spiritual sphere but not in the social. And again, just as in the hagiographies, we see that the identity of the Brahmin is the vital point where the spiritual and the social meet and become inextricably confused.

It must be admitted, though, that not all of India's texts share this ambivalent attitude about Brahminhood. The *Vajrasūcī*,[36] for instance, offers perhaps the best example of a pre-colonial Sanskrit text whose central theme is a full-scale, unambiguous attack on the birth-based *varṇa* system. This text aims to demonstrate "that there exists no single essential intrinsic trait or substance in which *varṇa* distinctions can be located and legitimized" and thus that the "only legitimate basis for *varṇa* distinctions is personal conduct. A person who acts as a Brahmin becomes a Brahmin; a person who acts as a Shudra becomes a Shudra" (Lorenzen 2000: 445–46). Cases such as the *Vajrasūcī* are quite rare; however, even where texts like the *Mahābhārata*, Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*, and *Rāmcaritmānas* clearly affirm inegalitarian social ideologies (for example, privileges and prohibitions based on birth into a particular social class), there often exist "alternate" or "oppositional" tellings of these narratives that adapt, remove, and/or reinterpret stories in the interests of specific communities who have been offended or disadvantaged by the more normative/dominant versions. In this respect, Paula Richman's pioneering volumes on the diversity and dissent encompassed in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition deserve special mention for having enriched our understanding of how various communities—ranging from women to 'untouchables' to Tamil-separatists—have not passively received these narratives, but rather have taken an active role in creating, adapting, and interpreting them in ways that affirm their specific self-identity and social philosophy (Richman 1991a, 2001).[37] One might consider many such "alternate" tellings as examples of James C. Scott's "hidden transcripts," narratives that a "subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal…that [represent] a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (1990: xii). Regardless, the key point to be

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made here is that the narratives from the epic and hagiographical literature that I have presented in this essay constitute—to borrow Richman's typology—"authoritative" tellings which, unlike "oppositional" or "alternate" tellings, have a long-standing (typically centuries-old) and vast (often pan-Indian) sphere of influence and have thus acquired a privileged cultural status "as literary monuments...from which it is difficult to escape. One can negotiate, reject, or be in conversation with them, but one can seldom ignore them" (Richman 2001: 10). These "authoritative" tellings cannot be ignored because they represent the terms of the dominant discourse and, as Scott points out—and as the "alternate" tellings themselves seem to affirm—"the terrain of the dominant discourse is the only plausible arena of struggle" (1990: 103).

In briefly looking at the "authoritative" passages above from the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmcaritmānas*, then, I have sought simply to show that ambiguity regarding caste and Brahminhood has quite a long and influential history in India and is rather deeply culturally entrenched. In *bhakti* literature, this ambivalence emerges and subtly disrupts and hinders any genuine egalitarian spirit. As we have seen, the hagiographies of Tiruppāṇ, Nandaṇār, Cokhāmeḷā, and Raidās openly acknowledge, mock, and criticize the flaws of Brahmins and clearly demonstrate the gap between the behavior of Brahmins and the spiritual ideal of 'Brahminhood.' Ultimately, however, the Brahmins still end up right where they started: on the top of a purity-based social hierarchy. The hagiographies of the 'untouchable' saints teach us that even in the context of *bhakti* theory Brahmins are innocent until proven guilty; they are Brahmins until deeming themselves not worthy. The 'untouchable,' on the other hand, is guilty until proven innocent; his impurity is real and he deserves his lot until, through extraordinary behavior, he proves that his spiritual worth does not match his social status, as the laws of *karma* and rebirth would seem to necessitate.

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, I have sought here to demonstrate that the failure of *bhakti* religious movements to achieve lasting egalitarian social reform is not merely a problem of *bhakti* theory not successfully being put into practice, but is a function of *bhakti* theory itself, which is not so egalitarian after all. In briefly examining episodes from the hagiographies of the four main 'untouchable' *bhakti* saints, we have seen that a confusion emerges in these texts in which the *social identity* of the Brahmin caste—a social class that one is born into—continues to be identified with the *spiritual ideal* of 'the Brahmin' while at the same time the stories openly express a message that true Brahminhood—a spiritual condition in which one's thoughts, words, and deeds are pure—is not a function of caste position, but rather of one's devotion and spiritual mindset. In the end these *bhakti* texts demonstrate that sincerity and intensity of devotion may allow one to transcend all impurities and social distinctions in the spiritual sphere, but caste is much less easily discarded in the ordinary social sphere. As King Bijjala states in Girish Karnad's play *Tale-Daṇḍa*, "One's caste is like the

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skin on one's body. You can peel it off top to toe, but when the new skin forms, there you are again: a barber—a shepherd—a scavenger!" (1993: 15).

Authorial Intention in *Bhakti* Hagiography

Thus far, I have purposefully avoided an extended discussion of the sticky issue of intentionality in the writing of these *bhakti* hagiographies. My central goal has not been to explain *why* the contradictory messages regarding caste are present in these hagiographies so much as to show that (*a*) they are indeed present as part of the stories' fundamental narrative structures (and should thus disrupt any notions we might have of a singular, coherent *bhakti* ideology characterized by an egalitarian ethos) and (*b*) the presence of such ambiguity within the *bhakti* message itself provides strong evidence for why *bhakti* has consistently failed throughout its history to bring about enduring egalitarian social praxis. In this final section, I would like to speculate briefly on the matter of authorial intention in the *bhakti* hagiographies. If one were to attempt to answer the question of why these mixed messages about caste emerge in these hagiographical texts, one might begin their interpretation from one of two primary poles.

In one scenario, Brahmin authors could sincerely have sought to make spiritual ideal into social reality, to make 'Brahminhood' only about the purity of one's thoughts, words, and deeds and not about birth or social class. In this scenario, one might argue that the notions of caste impurity and Brahmin spirituality are so fundamental and deeply ingrained in Indian culture that they emerge in the hagiographical literature almost unconsciously, outside of intention. Unable to think outside of the networks of power and knowledge defining their very subjectivity, the theme of caste impurity would have emerged unintended alongside and in opposition to the theme of spiritual egalitarianism whose propagation was these authors' *conscious* goal.

In a second scenario, one could argue that the double messages in the hagiography are quite intentional on the part of the Brahmin authors. One might suggest that theory and narrative often hide the true motives of the theory-makers and thus the gap between *bhakti* theory and practice is quite intentional and quite intentionally concealed. From this perspective we might see *bhakti* hagiography as a form of hegemonic discourse designed to create a *bhakti* "tradition," an intentionally selective version of the past designed to connect with and ratify a present that is in the interests of the dominant social class (Williams 1977: 115–16). Approaching the issue from this angle, one might argue that while the *bhakti* tradition is usually understood to be characteristically opposed to Brāhmaṇical religious orthodoxy, it has actually been mediated, molded and authorized by the dominant institutional power, the hegemonic discourse, of the Brahmin elite. In this view, by admitting that salvation is open to all and that spiritual worth is entirely separate from birth and social class, Brahmins subtly reinforced the social hierarchy in place, maintaining Brahmin social superiority under the guise of an egalitarian spirituality. In large part,

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this would fit Guha's understanding that the *bhakti* mode of religion is "an ideology of subordination *par excellence*" used throughout Indian history as a means "to endear the dominant to the subordinate and thereby justify servitude, spiritualizing the efforts and frustrations experienced by the lower classes in the labor they provided to the elite" and thus making submission "appear self-induced, voluntary, and collaborative" (1997: 54). While a number of Dalit intellectuals have adopted this line, I think the model is far too skeptical and conspiratorial, while also inaccurately conceiving the dynamics of power as primarily a top-down exertion of ideology by and for the dominant. Nevertheless, one could soften Guha's approach to argue more convincingly that Brahmin self-interest was a major force in the composition of these hagiographies and was consciously used as a tool to maintain power.

The historical reality—if such a thing exists—almost certainly lies somewhere in between the two poles of interpretation I have laid out. Undoubtedly, these *bhakti* hagiographers were products of their socio-historical context and their specific location within that context. The challenge is to conceive of them in a way that allows for agency and sincerity of intention, as opposed to cynically reading their work as simply either a conscious exertion of strategy in the interests of the Brahmin class or as a product of power-knowledge discourses entirely removed from the author's agency and intention. In the end, surely it is the case that sincere devotional sentiment and genuine egalitarian motivation, along with tactful self-interest and greed for power, all played their part in the convoluted messages of the *bhakti* hagiographies we have examined. These mixed messages express a tension within both Indian culture and the individual hagiographers. As Hess remarks, "*bhakti* and orthodoxy are in some important sense opposed, and...the struggle between them can be observed in both the poet and the culture" (1988: 247). As we have seen, this very same tension can also be observed in the *bhakti* hagiographer.

Notes

1. For a more detailed analysis of how Indian nationalism and "the *bhakti* movement" narrative fit together, see especially Hawley's edited volume of the *International Journal of Hindu Studies* (11.3 [2007]) entitled *The Bhakti Movement: Says Who?* The emphasis put on *bhakti* as a pan-Indian *socially egalitarian* movement by late-nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian intellectuals such as Shukla, Dvivedi, and Bharatendu Harishchandra undoubtedly served to win the support and involvement of "the masses" in the nationalist movement. This social progress/reform/anti-caste dimension of *bhakti* rhetoric demonstrates how deeply entwined British colonialism and Indian nationalism are, for it not only reads liberal values into the past, but also reads colonial knowledge formations into that past. In light of Dirks' (2001) work on the British construction of caste as *the* central marker of Indian identity, it seems that many writers' championing of *bhakti* as anti-caste may be an articulation of colonial knowledge formations which speaks to something

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that is, at least in part, an historical illusion. If caste did not exist in the way we—both in the West and in India—have typically conceived it since British rule, how can "the *bhakti* movement" be characterized, as the common trope suggests, as having transcended or opposed caste throughout its history?

2. This is not to say that well-intentioned efforts for egalitarian social change have not been made in the context of *bhakti* movements, but successes, especially in regard to caste, have generally been rare and short-lived. Basava (*ca.* 1105–68), the great Vīraśaiva (Liṅgāyat) leader and saint, inaugurated a religious movement centered on social reform and the rejection of caste distinctions; however, caste came to reassert itself within the Vīraśaiva community (see Leslie 1998). Dalmia (2001) provides evidence for the radical social teachings of the early Vallabhite community, suggesting that the Vallabha *sampradāya* was originally quite egalitarian and only later gained its reputation for opulence and strict hierarchy. Stein (2004) describes the failed attempts of Śrīvaiṣṇavas in allowing 'untouchables' into their temples in medieval times. Perhaps the closest thing we have to a success story in *bhakti*-related social reform and rejection of caste is the Rāmnāmīs of central India, who are discussed in detail in Lamb (2002).

3. Srinivas (2003) argues that "The Bhakti movement gave the hope of salvation to millions of people from among low class groups and women. The Brahmin was ridiculed for his preoccupation with ritual, and purity and impurity; and his claims to supremacy. The Bhakti saints proclaimed that a non-intellectual love of god was all that mattered. But powerful as these movements were, they failed to make a dent on caste hierarchy, for at the village level, the system of production of foodgrains and other necessities was inextricably bound up with a caste-based division of labour. The moral is that ideological attacks on hierarchy and Brahmanical claims to supremacy failed to create an egalitarian social order since at the local level the production of basic needs was inextricably bound up with jati." This quotation comes from an originally unpublished talk Srinivas delivered in November 1999 at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.

4. Champakalakshmi (2004) suggests that the egalitarian theology of Tamil *bhakti*—the supposed original source of "the *bhakti* movement"—originated as much out of political necessity and competition for patronage and followers than out of any other reason. In the Tamil South, popular Hinduism was in fierce competition with Buddhism and Jainism for patronage and followers (more so than with Brāhmaṇical religion) and "*bhakti*, by throwing open the path of salvation to all, irrespective of caste and social hierarchy, imbibed the ideals of the non-orthodox creeds, namely birth and caste as no obstacles to salvation, and thereby succeeded in rooting out 'heretical' sects" (69). In other words, from this perspective egalitarian *bhakti* rhetoric was at its very origin more about acquiring patronage and the allegiance of large segments of the populace than it was about actually changing the structure of society or addressing injustice.

5. Most scholars would readily agree that a clear 'Brahminization' of *bhakti* hagiographies can be observed over time, a process which occurred primarily in order that

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higher castes could justify allowing popular *bhakti* figures (especially low-caste or 'untouchable' figures) into their pantheon of saints. In this essay, I want to argue for more than this widely accepted 'Brahminization' of *bhakti* hagiography. My point is that even in the earliest, least 'Brahminized' versions of these 'untouchable' hagiographies, we see the phenomenon of mixed messages about caste—confusion about spiritual versus 'social' Brahminhood and an affirmation of caste purity distinctions expressed simultaneously with a message about the power of devotion to transcend all caste distinctions—built into the fundamental structure of these narratives.

6. As Mishra writes, "bhakti has not been read by the Indian Untouchable as a precursor moment in their own struggle toward political legitimation. Indeed, the absence of any agonistic or *vidroha* [protest] poetics in bhakti has led to the disavowal of bhakti as a precursor moment in contemporary Dalit Sahitya (Untouchable writing) itself....In their literature, contemporary Dalit intellectuals, by and large, have repudiated bhakti and have instead returned either to the teachings of the Buddha or to Marxism for epistemologies of social change" (1998: 40–41).

7. For a fascinating exploration of similar issues in the Islamic context—namely, Ṣūfī egalitarian rhetoric in fourteenth century North India—see Lee's excellent essay (2009).

8. Narayanan (2005: 56) notes that Tiruppāṇ is not the poet's real name (which is unknown), but a title in which *tiru* is a Tamil equivalent to the Sanskrit *śrī* while *pāṇ* refers to the untouchable *pāṇar* social class of bards.

9. Interestingly, in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book's contemporary retelling of the story, Tiruppāṇ is not raised by bards but by a sweeper, "a change that reflects a north Indian stereotype of Untouchables as sweepers, bhangi, or leather workers, not as bards" (Zelliot and Mokashi-Punekar 2005: 17).

10. In some manuscripts we have another episode added to the story, one that has become crucial in twentieth century retellings of Tiruppāṇ's life. (This additional episode occurs frequently in more recent versions of the story, but prior to the eighteenth century it seems to occur only in certain manuscripts of the Teṇkaḷai *Guruparamparāprabhāvam.*) According to these versions, one morning while Tiruppāṇ was on the riverbank, the temple priest went to the river to fill a pitcher with water. The Brahmin commanded Tiruppāṇ to move away from the river, but Tiruppāṇ was in a devotional trance and did not hear the command. When he did not respond, the angry priest threw a stone at him, hitting him on the face and making him bleed. When the priest returned to the temple, he was shocked to find the image of Raṅgī bleeding from the face and prayed for forgiveness for his violent action against Tiruppāṇ. It is at this point that Raṅgī comes to the priest in a dream and orders him to bring Tiruppāṇ into the temple on his shoulders, ostensibly more as punishment for his violent act against a pure-hearted devotee than for any other reason (see Hardy 1991: 140–42; Narayanan 2005: 60–61).

11. Vatakaḷai *Guruparamparāprabhāvam*, p.37, last nine lines. See Hardy (1991: 137).

12. Teṇkaḷai *Guruparamparāprabhāvam*, p.56, lines 17ff. See Hardy (1991: 140).

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13. *Alvarkal Vaibhāvam*, vv. 12–18. See Narayanan (2005: 58).

14. Furthermore, these versions all find it important to mention that Tiruppāṇ's 'untouchable' family "brought the baby up by giving him pure food" (polluting food such as meat, alcohol, and so on, normally being associated with 'untouchables'). Vatakaḷai *Guruparamparāprabhāvam*, p.37, lines 7–18. See Hardy (1991: 136).

15. See translation in Pechilis (2005: 99).

16. See translation in Vincentnathan (2005: 110).

17. For a detailed discussion of Raidās's dates, see Callewaert and Friedlander (1992: 26–28).

18. Prīyadās's text is a commentary on Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl* (*ca.* 1600), a concise but critically important *bhakti* hagiography written in the Hindi dialect of Brajbhāṣa.

19. Rāmānand is an absolutely pivotal, yet mysterious and controversial figure in the historiography of *bhakti*. According to most traditions, he lived in the fourteenth century and, preaching and writing in the vernacular, began a tradition in North India admitting men and women of all castes, serving as the *guru* of several famous North Indian *bhakti*-saints including Kabīr and Ravidās. For more information on the Rāmānandi sect, see Burghardt, (2004); Pinch (1996).

20. In the *Pothīpremabodh,* this woman who comes to seek initiation from Ravidās is not Queen Jhālī, but rather "princess Mīrābāī." This encounter has become a popular element in the hagiography of both Raidās and Mīrābāī (see Callewaert and Friedlander 1992: 26).

21. Anantadās's *Raidās Parchai*, chapter 13, verses 5–7. See translation in Schaller (2005: 224–25).

22. The sacred thread, or *yajñopavītam*, is traditionally given in the *upanayana* ceremony which makes up part of the Vedic initiation process among the three 'twice-born' classes of Brāhmaṇs, Kṣatriyas, and Vaiśyas. McGee explains that the sacred thread received by the Vedic student is to be worn daily "as a reminder of his responsibilities to a life of purity and righteousness" (2004: 345). She also notes importantly that the sacred thread, "although traditionally permitted to Vaiśyas and Kṣatriyas who were also eligible to undergo *upanayana*, has largely become a hallmark of Brāhmaṇ-hood. The sacred thread thus has become more of a mark of social status rather than of religious knowledge" (345). The sacred thread consists of three separate interwoven strands (given various symbolic interpretations) and is typically supported on the left shoulder and wrapped around the body, falling underneath the right arm.

23. Cokhā's household—his wife (Soyrabāī), son (Karmameḷā), sister (Nirmalā), and brother-in-law (Baṅkā)—also wrote *bhakti* poems, though their corpus is considerably smaller and less well-known. For more on the lives and poetry of Soyrabāī, Karmameḷā, Nirmalā, and Baṅkā, see Zelliot and Mokashi-Punekar (2005: 143–67).

24. In what follows, all quotations from the *Bhaktavijay* come from sections of the text translated in Zelliot and Mokashi-Punekar (2005: 189–94).

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25. Gokhale-Turner elaborates on this position in a separate piece, stating that "The implications of Chokha's message to the Untouchables are twofold. On the one hand, loyalty to Hinduism is taken for granted, and this involves simultaneous acceptance of the notions that Untouchables are the repository of pollution and that they will accept their role in the division of labor without demurral or hesitation. On the other hand, an even more potent suggestion is planted: the conviction that the solution to Untouchability cannot be collective—it must occur at the individual level and can only be expressed on a religious or spiritual plane. The distinctions of caste lie in the minds of men and not in the eyes of God; to that extent they are insignificant, and ultimately, unreal" (1986: 271).

26. Dalit Sahitya is a genre of modern Indian literature (authored primarily by Dalits) which emerged in the early 1960s and is dedicated to themes of 'untouchablity,' poverty, repression, revolution, and attacks on the Hindu religious and social order of caste.

27. Zelliot reiterates this sentiment, writing that Cokhāmeḷā "explained in one *abhaṅga* that his untouchable status was due to previous sin, and this means he no longer serves as a religious icon or source of pride," especially since "the Ambedkar movement, which culminated in a Buddhist conversion, totally rejected the concept that untouchable status was the result of karma, birth according to past deeds" (2000: 279).

28. Indeed, more than any other figure, B. R. Ambedkar has influenced the attitudes of contemporary Dalits and their perspectives on *bhakti*. Ambedkar was an 'untouchable' Mahār, like Cokhāmeḷā, but western-educated and politically oriented, he asserted emphatically that religious piety was ineffective in bringing about socio-economic justice and change. He stated once that "The appearance of Tulsī leaves around your neck will not relieve you from the clutches of the money-lenders. Because you sing songs of Rama, you will not get a concession in rent from the landlords. You will not get salaries at the end of the month because you make pilgrimages every year to Pandharpur." In late 1955, Ambedkar was asked to dedicate a small temple to Cokhāmeḷā, but he agreed to come only if he could dedicate the temple to the Buddha instead. As Ambedkar's ideology had become considerably more important and relevant than Cokhā's, the group agreed (see Zelliott 1981: 142–43). Not long after this, in October 1956, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism—converting hundreds of thousands of Dalits along with him—and explicitly condemned and rejected Hinduism. Since his death in December 1956, a cult of Ambedkar has developed in which he is deified and worshipped as a *bodhisattva*, a life-giver and protective father of the Dalit community whose writings are seen as sacred and whose life story is told as a model and source of inspiration (see Gokhale-Turner 1981: 38–39). Beyond Ambedkar, the Dalit movement's other primary frame of reference and source of symbols, images, and metaphors is "the world revolutionary movement" and figures such as Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X.

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29. Vincentnathan also notes that many of the 'untouchables' she interviewed had alternate versions of Nandaṇār's story in which he either does not enter the fire (before entering the temple) or does not emerge from it as a Brahmin. In all of these versions, a central motif is that the Brahmins are trying to capture and kill Nandaṇār.

30. It is important to note that several scholars working on and involved in contemporary Dalit movements have maintained *bhakti* and the *bhakti* poet-saints as important and exemplary sources for radical social change today. In particular, see the works of Jayant Lele and Gail Omvedt. Gokhale-Turner herself states that "within its own historical context, the poet-saint movement was fully as revolutionary as the *dalit* movement is today. In their own way, and given the limitations of the period, the saints rebelled against the *varna* order even though they were by no means effective in overthrowing it" (1981: 33). Indeed, Dalits and others looking for *bhakti* to work as an agent of social change are likely asking it to serve (post-) modern purposes that its original authors and propagators never had in mind. Along the same lines, however, scholars such as Lele have suggested that it was the pre-modern context of *bhakti* that made it unsuccessful at social reform and that it could in fact be socially liberating in a contemporary context (O'Connell 1993: 9).

31. Ramanujan states further that "Bhakti as anti-structure begins by denying and defying such an establishment; but in course of time, the heretics are canonized; temples are erected to them...[and] an elaborate theology assimilating various 'great tradition' elements may grow around them" (1973: 36).

32. In my view, Guha's subaltern analysis of *bhakti* is, for the most part, off the mark (see my concluding comments), but this particular remark proves well-justified in the vast majority of cases.

33. See Buhler's translation (1988: 25–26).

34. I am grateful to Arti Dhand for bringing this passage to my attention via her public communication with Steve Rosen on the RISA-L email listserv on February 8, 2007. All quotations from this *Mahābhārata* story are taken from J. A. B. van Buitenen's translation (1975: 561–67).

35. All translations of the *Rāmcaritmānas* come from Hess (1985: 245–46).

36. There are two separate Sanskrit texts with this title; one attributed (doubtfully) to the first-century Buddhist scholar Aṣvaghoṣa, and the other (often entitled the *Vajrasūcy Upaniṣad*) even more doubtfully attributed to Śaṅkara.

37. In Richman (1991a), see especially Ramanujan's "Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," which provides an introduction to the vast number of radically different—sometimes vernacular, sometimes heterodox—tellings of the "basic" narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa;* Rao's "A *Rāmāyaṇa* of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu," which presents songs which Telugu women created and supplemented to Vālmiki's telling in order to speak to their own experiences and perspectives, while also pointing out the differences in content and attitude in songs created by Brahmins and those added on by low-caste women; Richman's own "E.V. Ramasami's Reading of the *Rāmāyaṇa*," which examines a radical and influential re-interpretation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative—as a thinly

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veiled history of Brahmin-led Āryan subjugation of Dravidians in the South—articulated in the interests of Tamil/Dravidian nationalism in the late 1920s; and Lamb's "Personalizing the *Rāmāyaṇ:* Rāmnāmīs and Their Use of the *Rāmcaritmānas*," which describes how the low-caste Rāmnāmī community of Chattisgarh in Madhya Pradesh, in their highly-revered version of Tulsī's *Rāmcaritmānas*, actually removed sections of the text that affirmed caste hierarchy and Brāhmaṇical purity beliefs, reasoning that these sections could not possibly have been in the original text and must have been the later interpolations of Brahmins.

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